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Tips for Hiring Tech Professionals

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It's inevitable that during the course of our careers each of us will have to hire and manage professionals to provide services about which we know little. Me? I get nervous when trying to evaluate the job my accountant is doing. In my experience, most small business owners feel this way about hiring a web developer or email marketing manager. Always worried they're going to pay too much and not get what they need.

It doesn't have to be that way! Here's how to confidently hire and manage tech specialists.

Define Your Needs

It's a simple place to start, but completing this step will pay dividends in the long run. Most people start with the job title. For instance, they might say, "I need a web person" or "I need a social media manager." But what if you don't know the exact name for the type of professional that does what you need? You can end up with the wrong person for the job.

Instead, start by writing a list of what you need to have handled by a "web person." Maybe it looks something like this:

- Building a new website
- Designing a new website
- Managing issues with email addresses (yourname@yourbusinessname.com)
- Updating the website with new products
- Updating hours and services on the website
- Posting to social media
- Adding email addresses to MailChimp
- Creating and sending emails in MailChimp
- Filling out a "Google My Business" listing
- Running Google ads
- Setting up Google Analytics

Those are all web or Internet related tasks, for sure. It's possible you could find someone who was reasonably

capable of doing all of those things, but not probable. People who aren't tech specialists tend to lump any and all tech specialists together, but tech-related jobs are actually fairly specialized.

Let's put it this way: just because someone is a professional basketball player doesn't mean she's good at water polo. But they're all sports, right? Sure, but they're different sports! A web developer and someone who runs Google ads (a paid media specialist) are different professionals.

Rent or Own?

Most IGC staff are employees, which is why your first inclination might be to hire one person to do everything. It's how you've always done it! To fill your tech needs, most of your tech staff should be contractors. It could be that the only contractors you've engaged before are consultants that develop management plans or streamline processes. Tech contractors should produce hard deliverables, such as a new website or a fully configured Google analytics account, but tech contractors will still leave (at least most of them will) eventually.

Some tech help will be project-based contractors; others will be part-time with long-term agreements and others will be full-time in-house.

If you truly needed people to handle everything on the list above you'd be best served by hiring (owning) a digital marketing manager that can produce some deliverables on their own (such as marketing emails, web copy or perhaps some website updates), as well as manage the rest of the (rented) contractors.

Divide & Conquer

Here's how you can divide up that big list of tech tasks by the type of professional that would handle the task.

Web Developer

- Building a new website
- Designing a new website

IT Professional

- Managing issues with email addresses (yourname@yourbusinessname.com)

Website Manager

- Updating the website with new products
- Updating hours and services on the website

Marketing Manager or Assistant

- Manage additional digital marketing or tech contractors
- Posting to social media
- Adding email addresses to MailChimp
- Creating and sending emails in MailChimp
- Filling out a "Google My Business" listing

Paid Media Specialist

- Running Google ads

- Setting up Google Analytics

Have tech tasks that aren't on that list? Google them! Type in something like, "What type of professional runs Facebook ads?" Read some articles and notice the common threads between them. That will help you know what to title the job and what responsibilities that person would expect to handle.

Get Quotes and Conduct Interviews

Know how to divide up the work? Post your job or seek proposals.

I've had the most luck posting jobs on UpWork.com for contract positions. The website developersforhire.com also has a fantastic questionnaire to help point you toward the right web developer if that's what you're looking for. There are also industry consultants that can help you "go shopping" for tech talent.

If you get vastly different quotes from applicants, ask each why the quotes are so different. "I have several bids for this project and they range from $10k to $20k. Can you help me understand the differences?" Usually each quote or bid will include different types of services. A $20k website might include more content development (words and pictures), while the $10k quote expects you to provide your own content.

Different quotes can reflect different amounts of experience. A newer, less-experienced developer might charge less. Or a company experienced with one type of web platform, such as WordPress, might charge less to develop a Shopify site, but they'd be up front if asked, saying, "We're WordPress specialists, but we're beginning to work on Shopify. The difference in price is that we'll be 'learning on the job.'"

Learning on the Job

Everybody wants to hire experts, but technology changes every single day. Most people are used to hiring for experience, with the answer to the question "Have you done this before?" carrying more weight than the answer to "Are you confident you can read the instructions and solve the problem quickly and effectively? Give me an example of a time you've done that." Sometimes you can hire an expert and sometimes you'll have to hire an expert in figuring things out.

You can control costs and deliverables for the "figuring things out" contractors, to some extent. Here's how you do that!

Assign a Sample Project & Evaluate

Before you hire someone to re-plumb your entire facility, ask them to replace a toilet. (Metaphorically.)

Again, we're so used to hiring full time on-site staff (getting married) that we forget we can hire contractors (date). The dating equivalent of hiring is giving someone a small test project.

Evaluate how they did on the job. Did they complete it according to their estimates? If not, why? Coming in 50% under budget is just as much of a red flag as coming in 50% over budget. That shows the person didn't know how to accurately estimate—whether they're an expert or they're an expert in figuring things out. People who "figure things out" on a regular basis should be able to accurately estimate how long it will take them to assess the problem and come up with a game plan, and then they should be able to accurately estimate the fix.

Another thing to notice is if they asked questions. You can get them to ask questions by giving them a somewhat vague assignment. "Replace the banner on the home page." They should come back with questions. "Which banner?" "Where do I find the banner file?" "When do you want it changed?" "Do you need to review on a test server before I replace the banner?" If they don't ask questions, don't engage for long-term or large projects.

It might take a few extra weeks to go through these test project steps, but doing so will save you a lot of headache in

the long run. (Want to know how I know this? Drop me an email. I'll tell you my horror stories.)

Engage for Ongoing Support

Once you've decided you want to keep your tech professional for a while, establish clear terms of engagement. Define:

- Meeting schedule or check-ins
- Monthly retainer (or other type of retainer or payment schedule) with what's included
- Hourly rate
- Communication preferences
- Expected turnaround time
- Reporting requirements and due dates

When working with tech professionals you have to pay attention to their work and manage them. You do this with clearly defined terms, reporting and check-in schedules. A report can be as simple as a monthly email with a list of tasks completed or as complicated as a detailed analytics report with website traffic stats, online store conversion rates and analysis of the stats.

Be Clear, Confident and Consistent

The urge (again, how do I know this?) when managing specialists handling things you don't know how to do is to micromanage and control every step of the project. The urge is to ask for a lot of explanation of why something is happening or how it works. That's not necessary and will increase your costs. You are, after all, hiring someone to build a website or run Google ads, not to build and teach you how to do those things. (Doing and teaching are two different services.) But you can absolutely ask for reports and hold your contractors accountable for reporting. On big projects, you can tie compensation to specific milestones in the project.

Hiring and managing tech talent doesn't have to be complicated just because tech can be complicated. You just need to be clear with expectations and consistent in managing. **GP**

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